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ABSTRACT

During its two and one-half years of use, a computerized text editor has proven to be a helpful revision tool for a freshman composition course. Student feedback has helped to overcome initial problems with the system. A streamlined learner's guide, for example, that made formal training in using the computer unnecessary and increased student willingness to experiment with their writing, was created to replace an earlier, overly complex guide. A sequence of simple assignments demanding a progressively more complex computer vocabulary was found to keep students' attention focused on the writing rather than on mastering the computer. A number of problems, however, still remain, among them, restrictions on computer use imposed by the small number of terminals available to students and the high cost of operating them. Student reactions to revising on the text editor have been mixed: about half the students felt that it inhibited revision while the others believed it made revising easier. Most felt, however, that it was a helpful typing and proofreading aid. It has also been used successfully in helping students analyze their writing style and evaluate organization strategies. The large number of positive student reactions suggests that a more flexible system could become a powerful teaching aid. (MM)

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# Writing with Wylbur: Teaching Freshman Composition with a Mainframe Computer

During the last two and a half years, I have experimented with using a computerized text editor in freshman composition. My students used a time-sharing system called Wylbur (1), which performs word processing functions, but was designed for programmers, rather than writers and is thus rather more cumbersome than a conventional word processor or text editor. As a result, in introducing Wylbur into my regular composition curriculum, I learned more about the mechanics of the system, and of teaching it effectively, than about its possibilities for revision. Still, my findings may prove useful to anyone considering using a computer in a composition class, and particularly, to schools equipped with time-sharing systems.

The first full-scale experiment in using Wylbur for essay revision fell to my 2 freshman composition classes in the spring quarter, 1981. Previously, I had used Wylbur in limited ways, offering it as an option to any student willing to learn how to use it, or assigning a particular exercise to be worked at the terminal, according to a few simple directions. But I had not required a whole class to use it for revision, nor did I attempt to assess my students' reactions to it. The 44 students in my 2 classes had first to learn the system and then to revise 2 essays

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on it. I hoped first of all, to see if the project would work at all: could students learn Wylbur well enough to revise their essays on it? What problems would arise in the process? And, finally, how useful would Wylbur be for teaching composition? Would it hinder or enhance revision? I found that before exploiting Wylbur's potential for text revision--before even finding out what that potential might be--I had to confront some concrete issues about using it--how to teach students the system without infringing on classroom time, and what limitations our particular system would impose on its use.

Because the course received no advance publicity, students did not know when they pre-enrolled that they would work with a computer, and my class turned out to be a random assortment of UCLA freshman. Most of them had little experience with or predilection for computerized machinery; many were eager to learn word processing, while others, recalcitrant, considered Wylbur an imposition which their friends, happily ensconced in more conventional sections, were spared. Though from the outset I warned students of the added work and urged the truly overburdened to switch to another section, almost all--no doubt afraid of losing their place in an over-enrolled course--chose to stay.

The first task, then, was to teach this mixed group--varied in attitude and aptitude--to use the system. They had three weeks to learn Wylbur and the remaining 7 weeks of the term to revise two essays on it. Within this loose schedule, they learned

Wylbur primarily on their own and at their own pace. Each student received a copy of the Wylbur Learner's Guide, (published by UCLA'S Office of Academic Computing) which is designed for self-teaching. Their other resource was Michael Cohen, software consultant to the UCLA Writing Programs, who gave an introductory lecture and two problem-solving sessions in the classroom and often found himself "on call" for emergencies. I, too, could be called upon in a crisis.

Despite a few crises--Wylbur did occasionally erase a morning's work--most students worked independently and successfully. On a questionnaire they filled out at the end of the quarter, 81% of the students reported Wylbur to be at least manageable at the start, and only 5% still found it difficult at the end. But accompanying their answers to the questionnaire was a running commentary on the problems they encountered along the way. They complained most frequently about their failures with specific operations--getting Wylbur to justify margins, double-space, underline, etc. Because most students ascribed their problems to their own mistakes rather than to malfunctions in Wylbur, I immediately recognized the need for a more efficient training procedure. Clearly students could learn Wylbur in a 1-quarter composition course, but the process did not need to be so awkward or frustrating.

The main problem was the Learner's Guide. Because Wylbur was not originally designed as a word processor, and because it performs many non-word processing functions, the Learner's Guide

is full of instructions that were irrelevant and confusing to our students. As one student put it, "we had so many directions that we didn't use thrown at us that we couldn't help but get confused," and, in fact, only 13% of the students said they consulted the guide as a reference. The sheer bulk of the guide intimidated many students and made it an unwieldy reference: students needed to find information quickly, especially when they were at a terminal. As a result of these problems, Cohen and I wrote our own guide, describing only those operations students need for their assignments, presenting each procedure in the order students will need it, and organizing the guide for quick use as a reference. A trouble-shooting section at the end offers solutions to practical problems--what to do when the cursor gets stuck in the margins, the terminal locks, you can't find your printout, the computer goes down, etc. And, of course, the guide is written in English, not computerese.

The new manual made all the difference: the second group of students took to the computer more quickly and easily than the first group did, and they were far more willing to experiment with their writing. The manual also cut down on class time spent teaching Wylbur. On the survey, 92% of the second group said Wylbur was "manageable"s" or "effortless" at the start; 100%, "manageable" or "effortless" at the end. I have discovered that a well-written document is almost self-sufficient for teaching computerized text editing, and have discontinued the classroom lecture, finding it too abstract--too far from the experience at the terminal--to be practical. Rather than listen to a talk on

Wylbur, students read the appropriate section of the guide and go off to experiment at the terminal. They approach the terminal in pairs, each with a partner for help and support. Afterwards, they can return to the class with specific questions. More efficient, though impossible without a computer lab, would be to walk students through the initial steps while they were seated at the terminal. Because we do not have enough terminals to accommodate a whole class at once, I save the hands-on approach for the occasional apprehensive student, whom I personally escort to the computer.

In the absence of a formal training session, I have considered hiring tutors skilled in the computer system, either to train students or to assist them when they get stuck. As it is, my students often request help from neighboring terminal users--usually engineering students--who, despite good intentions, cannot always apply their particular expertise to the problem at hand. For a class without tutorial help, a walk-in or phone-in center that could offer immediate help at unpredictable times would also be valuable, especially if the terminals are available 24 hours, as ours are.

I also found that the student's initial encounters with the computer are more fruitful when combined with short, simple writing assignments, rather than the full draft I originally assigned. It is impossible to expect students to revise on the computer before they have fully mastered the system: my first group ended up, understandably, concentrating far more on

Wylbur's mechanics than on their writing. More recently, I have had students enter a short piece--a 1/2-page summary or description--on which they experiment with the computer's ability to move and replace letters and print their work. At this point, they need only know how to sign on and off, and to tell the computer to collect and print their text. The second assignment requires them to type, but not revise, a full draft, and to experiment with eight additional commands for such operations as inserting blank lines, deleting unwanted lines, storing text for future use, and recalling a stored text. Such a sequence of simple assigments, demanding a progressively increasing computer vocabulary, allows students to learn the system gradually and eventually to make the system a tool for, rather than a distraction from, the real business at hand--writing.

Though training was the first and most immediate concern, the biggest problem, and the one which generated the most complaint, was lack of terminals. Here, again, a computer lab set up especially for composition students would help enormously. Without such a lab, my students used the public terminals available to all of UCLA. Since the whole campus community shares about 45 public terminals, the sudden addition of 44 users overloaded the computer (slowing, and sometimes shutting it down), infuriated Math Science habitues (whose class projects depended on computer access), and inconvenienced everyone from my students to Office of Academic Computing administrators. Students complained angrily of long lines and 1-, even 2-hour, waits for a terminal.

Once they landed a terminal, they confronted a 15-minute to 1-hour time limit on its use, and with it, the frustration of work prematurely interrupted, the exasperation with stubborn users who violated the time restriction and kept on typing, and, for at least 1 student, the embarrassment of getting caught stealing time: "After waiting for 2 hours, I came to the terminal. Then after only 1 hour, 15 minutes, a nagging man called OAC to kick me out. I was on a 1-hour terminal. Eek!" The scarcity of terminals made the project far more taxing than it need have been and has discouraged me from giving Wylbur a major role in the course. I now require my students to learn the rudiments of Wylbur, but let them decide how extensively to use it. I assign a few introductory assignments early in the quarter before the computer is flooded with end-of-term business and engineering projects, and leave extensive computer-assisted-revision only to the most ambitious. So far, this system has worked well enough; only about half my students feel that Wylbur's benefits justify its inconveniences, and so the strain on the system is considerably less. But, at the same time, I, as an instructor, cannot fully integrate the computer into my course.

Another difficulty of a time-sharing system is its expense: every minute the student spends at the terminal costs money. The Office of Academic Computing allots us a class account--so that neither our students nor Writing Programs pays for Wylbur out of its own pocket--but each student's allotment is limited to about $50, or 20 hours of computer time. Without unlimited access,

students cannot compose freely on the screen, but must write a reasonably complete draft before committing it to Wylbur. The system thus encourages superficial, mechanical revision at the terminal, leaving substantial rewriting to the pen or typewriter.

While these limitations have prevented most students from fully exploiting Wylbur's capabilities, many students did revise--a few even composed--at the terminal. The first group did little revision: they spent so much of their time simply acquainting themselves with the system that they confined themselves to the simpler procedures, overlooking commands which might encourage wholesale revision: it is easier to type over letters and words than to issue commands to move, copy, add, or delete whole paragraphs, and thus easier to revise for mechanical errors than for more sweeping changes in content, organization, or style. The second group, however, benefiting from the new manual, went beyond mere editing to more substantial revision. With the frustration of learning Wylbur considerably reduced, this group managed to work around the time limits on the terminals and to explore Wylbur's value as a revision tool.

Their experiences revising on Wylbur were mixed. About half the students felt that Wylbur inhibited revision; the small screen didn't give a full picture of their essay and made it hard for them to rearrange large units of text. They also worried about the computer's going down, and were embarrassed by the exposed screen, which allowed strangers to read over their shoulder. At best, they felt that Wylbur was no different from a

typewriter; at worst, that it interfered with revision, that their unfamiliarity with Wylbur's workings caused problems that complicated their writing efforts and slowed them down. "By the time I had rearranged my schedule to allow time for Wylbur, and had gotten a terminal, I really didn't care what my paper looked or sounded like; I just wanted something to turn in." Those who felt that Wylbur improved their essays said that the computer made revising easier and faster, that they produced more, and that Wylbur was more fun than a typewriter. By reducing their fear of mistakes, Wylbur gave them the confidence to experiment; and the pleasure of trying out Wylbur's different commands made them even more adventurous. Furthermore, because Wylbur allowed them to combine work with fun, students worked longer on their revision. These students also found that the phosphorescent screen objectified their work-- "the essay seemed less like something I wrote myself when shining at me on an illuminated screen," and put them in their reader's position: "it seemed very stark and cold on Wylbur, which enabled me to read it as another reader might."

If Wylbur got mixed reviews as a revision tool, it received praise as an agreeable typewriter: it helped poor typists by allowing easy typographical correction and relieveds the fear of making mistakes. One student found it "comforting to know that if I made a mistake, I could fix it without retyping the paper." Students were pleased that it saved them paper and whiteout and easily generated multiple copies for group editing. Wylbur also helpeds poor proofreaders by combining easy mechanical correction

with a fresh view of the text: "Mistakes that I would normally overlook on a typewriter stood out more clearly on the screen." More importantly, those who balked at major revision because it required major retyping were less reluctant to make wholesale changes in their work.

These responses suggest that even when used as a typewriter, Wylbur can facilitate revision. With unlimited access, students might feel free to try out a variety of composition strategies and styles--to experiment as adventurously as we would like them to. A less expensive system would allow us to assign a variety of invention and composing exercises. At present, students have access to Homer (2), a program which identifies the features of what Richard Lanham calls the "official style"--overly long sentences, nominalized and "to be" verbs, excessive prepositions, and vague catch-all terms, like "aspect," "society," and "factor" (3). The student first types an essay into Wylbur, then lets Homer analyze it. Homer's game-like quality makes it an entertaining way to draw a student's attention to particular stylistic issues, and its apparent objectivity helps reinforce what we tell students in class. With printouts in hand, students discuss Homer's comments in class; their reactions to Homer's analysis invite discussion of the appropriateness of one style over another.

In addition to running Homer, students have played with Wylbur's ability to manipulate large units of prose for an exercise in viewing their writing objectively. They print

successive versions of their essay, reversing the first and last paragraphs, erasing the first paragraph, and rearranging other paragraphs and sentences. The point of the exercise is to disrupt the writer's established view of the essay, with the ultimate goal of either suggesting revision strategies or validating and justifying the original organization. Like Homer's stylistic map, this exercise helps students look closely at the surface of their writing.

In spite of the inconveniences of our particular system, and given numerous opportunities to recoil from it, most of my students profited from Wylbur. For every student foiled by the system, at least one student found Wylbur "delightful" and appreciated the exposure to computers. In light of all the difficulties, these positive responses suggest that a more flexible, system could be a powerful pedagogical tool. Amid all their frustrations, 81% of my students in the first experiment reported Wylbur to be at least "somewhat helpful" for revision. At the very least, the text editor fosters computer literacy, as more than one student gratefully acknowledged: "I felt that I had accomplished two things. It made me proud."

## Notes

1. Wylbur was developed at Stanford and is distributed by On-Line Business Systems.
2. Michael E. Cohen, "Homer" (PASCALVS version), UCLA, 1983/(Apple II Pascal version), Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983.
3. Richard A. Lanham, Revising Prose (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979).